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The Girls' Army · *Emily White*

WHEN PETER RETURNS from officer training it is usually near dark, and he's lightheaded, bold and hungry. He's relieved to see his house approaching after the merciless day, and he's glad to know his sister Ellen will be waiting there, impressed by his shabby, tight uniform, his after-school war-stories. She is always there, just inside the broken doorway. Tonight he has something much better than usual to show her—a gun he bought at a pawn shop. It weighs down his backpack beneath water-damaged textbooks, skin magazines, his umbrella and his soft, rotting lunch.

At dinner he tells her to expect a surprise but only after the dishes have been cleared, after their mother has had a few glasses of wine and is talking in her caved-in voice, does Peter take Ellen down into the basement and show her the gun. She says, it's so heavy, it would be too heavy for me to carry out into the world. Wait, he says, let me put on a show for you.

He is still in uniform, his eyes are small and tired, and Ellen thinks he seems a little drunk from dinner. It takes him awhile to get his bearings. First he marches in place like they do at drill practice, staring straight ahead. Then he shouts that the enemy is coming and ducks behind their old toy chest, firing the empty gun at every shadow, firing at Ellen when she moves or laughs. Don't laugh, he says, I am surrounded.

Upstairs their mother is slowly, forgetfully cleaning up after dinner. She moves through the white kitchen hissing at the radio talk show host, a man she hates more than she's hated any man, although she listens to him every night. It is hard for her to keep track of which dish goes where in this house, and so she piles them into the cupboard, quickly closes the door before they tumble out. She hears the kids rustling downstairs, the wind from the street which carries trash into their driveway. So many bits of paper littering the pavement, one must carry a message.

She feels certain that if John came around tonight asking for her she'd let him in, even though she knows better. He often appears long after dark and

leans on the doorbell like a bratty child, or like he's being pursued. She knows Ellen and Peter don't approve of him; they think he's a liar. Certainly he's lying when he says he's a private detective, tracking the killer of a high school girl. She knows he actually works for a messenger service, driving from building to building handing important documents to rushed secretaries. He has probably been on every escalator in the city. He has risen to every floor. She thinks this is admirable and doesn't know why he feels the need to make up another life, although she can't deny that she enjoys the crime story as it spills out of him, changing every night, a bad plot lifted straight from television.

The kids dislike John because his eyes are skittish, and because he's loud in his sleep, always blustering and crying. When he comes for dinner he describes grisly murders—a girl torn to pieces down to her teeth, a girl he says he will avenge, he will reassemble. Peter says John is a coward and a fake, that he could beat him at anything; he could hold his head in a headlock or hold him underwater until he chokes. He tells Ellen to steer clear of this ratty new boyfriend, and to take every word he says with a grain of salt.

Ellen has read her mother's journals where John takes her from behind while they're at Sauvie's Island, where her mother momentarily feels a kind of fullness and panic and belonging. Ellen tries to imagine what it must be like to fuck outside far away from your kids, and she wonders if perhaps their mother wishes they were gone so John could march around at all hours telling his lies, or scream in his sleep, or drag in late at night all wilted and sorry.

Lately Ellen has started to think that if there's a power given to girls that's taken away, it must come back somewhere, in some basement life. Maybe it comes back for her mother while she's fucking. For Ellen she feels the crush of something new inside her when she touches Peter's gun, and for the first time in months her blood's rushing. Where has her energy gone? Peter crowds so close to her, sometimes it seems his face is a world. Every night he makes frozen lemonade and there's ice on his breath, sour and arctic. Tonight he says lie still, lie still, until I give you the all-clear.

How do I know when the enemy's coming? Ellen asks him. Is there ever a time when I should surrender?

They hide the gun in a chest of drawers where they've stored a few dingy stuffed animals, old pop-up books, a pile of photographs where no one is recognizable, where they can never pick out their father. They walk upstairs and find their mother sitting on the floor in the kitchen's bright corner. They say what they always say—we love you, we love you, go to bed.

At school Ellen likes to skip class and loiter in the bathroom, spying on the girls who seem to live in there, smoking, leaving lipstick prints on the mirror, tracing hard lines around their eyes. They are four friends and they go to rock shows together and sometimes one or another goes home with a boy, and sometimes they get carded and sent away. One girl has painted the face of a man on the back of her jeans jacket, a man Ellen knows is famous, though she can't place him. One time Ellen interrupts their talk and says, I have never been to a rock show, do your ears hurt afterward? They laugh at her and the tallest girl, Diane, tells her she is from another planet. Ellen wears stained grandmother blouses, pleated skirts with the pleats failing, swollen broken penny loafers. Do I need a new image? She often wonders. Peter always tells her no, you dress like a distracted queen, like someone who will be remembered later.

Ellen would like to be remembered by the girls in the bathroom, and now she's thinking about bringing the gun to school to show them, since they seem so bored, maybe she could take them out to the park and show them how to fire. She dreams about pulling the stiff aqua-net hair from their faces and looking into their eyes. She dreams them always next to her in the mirror, comparing their cheekbones, their coloring. Are we the same? she would ask them. How did we end up here, in this school where every year is torture?

On Ellen's 16th birthday John comes for dinner and drinks bourbon, talking in a surly, contrived voice about his murder case. He makes up a long story about the girl who died, how she was a cheerleader and everybody's all-American, pretty but not stuck-up. He talks about following the trail of blood, about finding her floating in the marsh, sitting there guarding what was left of her in the dark as he waits for the police to arrive.

He breaks the news to her parents and they say, we will do anything to find the killer but we don't have any money. And John says, I'll take the case anyway, we've got to find that brute.

And their mother says, oh John, that's wonderful of you, but she sounds lifeless. She brings out dinner, dry stringy pot roast, and she overdresses. Tonight Peter provokes John and says, why are you wasting your time here? The murderer could be on his way to another city. Why don't you go out right now and search? John's eyes glaze over with anger, his neck goes red, and he slams out of the house. Their mother cries, and Peter tries to make it up to her by bringing her cake in her room.

So she finds herself in bed alone, a plate of melting Neopolitan on the bedstand, as the kids descend wherever they descend to. Lately every room she enters seems unfamiliar, and her sleep is too powerful. Every night she lies in bed and wonders, will I return? She has watched Ellen who in all her paleness and awkwardness, with her poor scarred knees and fragile hands, seems to be growing stronger. She has watched Peter drift around the house as he waits for word about his navy assignment, always preparing for an imaginary battle. She loves them, but she is too tired to walk downstairs and see what they are up to. She knows she shouldn't care when John lies, that he is brittle and worthless, but she can't help it. If he lies, maybe there is a reason. She thinks it is better to feel wondrous than to be told something true.

I am glad you aren't torn apart and I can take you here, whole like this, John mumbles later, when he crawls inside. Yes, she says, I'm glad, too.

Down in the basement Peter likes to talk about natural disasters, how afterward people are forced to rise up against each other. You come to a point, he says, where nothing you knew before exists anymore. You must kill looters, and guard what remains and what is true. When he is sure their mother's asleep, Peter loads the gun with real bullets, fires out the garage-door window into the darkness. One night it goes off early, and a bullet ricochets off the wall and comes close to Ellen's head. Her ears ring into the next morning.

Although Ellen dreams of herself chopped to pieces, and although she can feel, every day, her old self dispersing, she reassures her breathless brother that she is alright, that she is safe and she is his. But she knows something is changing inside her. When she studies her face in the mirror and follows the teen magazine diagrams for blush contour, for the eye-shadow tapering out, she seems different. Her mother has noticed too. Now she stares at Ellen as she leaves the house in the morning, as if she is vanishing into the sunset.

One night Peter decides to test John and he holds the gun against his head in the middle of the night. It's a situation where Columbo would know exactly what to do. But John's a frail man, and he has no weapons, and he starts to cry. He leaves for good after that, forgetting his coat. He calls their mother occasionally and says he's wandering from city to city, and as soon as he finds the killer he'll come back.

The house feels strangely empty after that, the kind of emptiness where you can hear everything. Peter's movie posters curling and falling off the walls. Disoriented birds crashing against the windows. Ellen sits in her room and writes in a wide-ruled, pink diary. She lists the names of the girls in the bathroom: Traci, Diane, Tanya, Frankie. She writes down everything they've said to her. She wonders if any of them will end up dead, their lipstick splitting and splintering, their clothes shredded, their faces pale, paler even than they are now.

Sometimes while her mother is getting dressed, walking back and forth from her bedroom to the bathroom mirror, Ellen tries to get her to talk. She asks whether she misses John, and if perhaps she wants to go out searching for him. He is probably just downtown at the Imperial drinking, says Ellen, it's not that big a deal. Let's change the subject, says her mother. Let's just try to have a nice dinner.

It seems to Ellen her mother is always getting ready for something. She decks herself out like someone from a romance novel, but the evenings she plans never transpire; she sleeps early, and her sleep is a room in which she believes everything. Ellen can often hear her talking in her sleep—slow, passionate nonsense. One night while her mother's dead-to-the-world Ellen carries on a conversation with her, she tells her everything. About all the

boys at school she likes. About the gun shining heavy as life or sickness in her thoughts, and the way when she walks home from school she always thinks someone is following her. Is there anything wrong with me? Ellen asks. She waits for her mother to open her eyes.

A night arrives when Peter walks in the door bringing news. He will be transferred to a base in San Diego, and after that to an amphibious assault ship somewhere in the Gulf. Later when he comes to say goodnight to Ellen his face seems vacant, as if part of him is gone already, as if everything he does from now on will be stained with departure. They watch the moon for awhile, white as milk, as aspirin. He says I will live underwater but sometimes I'll come up on land. I will carry your photograph with me at all times. I will see intruders on the radar. I will sense them with a sixth sense. Later he goes out drinking and Ellen hears him out on the street around five A.M., breaking bottles, and she rises to the window to see him lying on his back in the driveway as morning comes up, his shirt open. It seems the first time in years she has seen him in the daylight.

A few days later, the last day before summer, Ellen takes the gun to school; after the last bell rings she enters the bathroom and holds it out to the restless girls. One by one they quit talking and turn to her, a few swallow their gum. Someone asks what she's planning to do with that thing and Ellen says well, I just wanted to show it to you. I was wondering if you guys aren't doing anything if you'd like to stay out all night in Washington Park. We'd be safe, since I know how to fire this. They look at each other, and finally Diane says, sure, you go on ahead and we'll meet you there, we have to go home and get our sleeping bags. And Ellen says Okay, I'll be in the rose gardens, see you there. She leaves them and walks outside. Dusk is rising and the school band rehearses some end-of-the-year songs, the cheerleaders move in clean formation, a few runners circle the track like sad dogs. I am glad this year is over, Ellen thinks, I am glad they're coming with me. It is strange to walk this far. It is strange to think I will stay awake all night and hear everything.